Get your head in the game with some fun at first ever STEMfest

By Brock Weir

Want to try your hand at coding, or maybe make a mini-robot to call your own?

Show off your skills in Science, Technology, and Math (STEM) this Saturday, January 28, at the Aurora Public Library's (APL) first ever STEMfest.

With an hour of code and featuring hands-on activities with Littlebits, Raspberry Pi, Cubelets, 3D printing, and demonstrations from the Aurora Bats and the Aurora Cheetahs ? the two teams from the Library's First Lego League Junior ? it is designed to bring a little fun, not to mention learning, for the whole family.

?Over the last couple of years, we have been getting more and more pieces of technology for people to play with and they have been really, really popular,? says APL's Reccia Mandelcorn. ?But, we have never put them together in one big program. We thought we could create a little festival with some of the products that we have to get people interested in developing their technology skills and we thought a festival would have full families come in.

?We found that even the technology that is appealing to people as young as five or six years old, their parents love it as well. The idea, in the same way as books, is that it is family literacy and we read together, and technology literacy is part of our current age and is part of where we're going. We're saying come and play together!

?What is so neat about this is it is all so much fun. You're learning, you're career-preparing, and you're having a really good time.?

A self-proclaimed ?disaster? when it comes to these programs and activities, Ms. Mandelcorn did not shy away from getting her feet wet ? metaphorically speaking, of course. She dove in, making a ?tiny little robot thing with blinking lights? with Cubelets. (?I tried that one because it was recommended for the youngest children and I thought I wouldn't feel too bad if I failed that one!?).

It was not completely unfamiliar territory though. Recently, the children's librarian brought Littlebits into a staff meeting and throughout the meeting there were beeps and honks ringing out from the hands of certain board members as they snuck in some fun.

?You couldn't put it down ? like potato chips!? says Ms. Mandelcorn. ?We found with technology, it really is intergenerational. The kids catch on really fast, but the grandparents like to play too. Anything with technology, with coding, is going to be integral to every single career that is coming up. Art is so multimedia in terms of plays and music, and I was speaking with a young man not too long ago, who is a med student, and before that he became an engineer so he could learn how to do all the engineering as he is hoping to help restore the ability to walk for people with spinal injuries. Technology is so into every single career we're looking at.

?If you want to survive in this world, you need technology. We, as a library, want to extend our literacy to give young people ? and people like me who are learning a little bit later ? the skills to understand what is going on in the world around us and to have fun while doing it.?

Coming through the door on Saturday, participants will be handed a passport they can get stamped at any or all of the tables, which can then be dropped into a box for a ballot draw. You can do everything, or you could even spend your whole time coding or building something with Raspberry Pi. It's totally up to you.

Come for the fun, and stay for a presentation from members of the Bats and Cheetahs as they show off the results of their Creature

Craze Challenge project, which explored concrete projects related to bees and animals who live with bees in their natural habitat ? real world applications for time-tested products and here, the kids will be peer mentors to participants.

STEMfest takes place at the Aurora Public Library this Saturday, January 28, from 2 ? 4 p.m.